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AUTHOR Bolin, Bill
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ABSTRACT

A recent call by its editors to rename the "Journal of Basic Writing" has ramifications toward professionalization of and a wider respect for the discipline of basic writing. Basic writing has been defined differently from composition studies which, in turn, has been distinguished from English studies. This defining process has moved alongside, or as a reaction to, the process of disciplinarity. Basic writing students are generally constructed as those who find academic writing tasks especially challenging. This deficit definition has encouraged administrators to define the field in a particular way by staffing it with temporary adjunct faculty and teaching assistants. If basic writing is to be considered a viable field of study by those not engaged in composition studies, prestige could be provided by using a higher number of full-time, tenured faculty. Another step is for the flagship journal in basic writing to make initial moves and to find a name for that journal that reflects such work and presents a positive image of its subject. The professionalization of basic writing will follow a name change, garnering more respect from both within and without the academy for what scholars in basic writing do. (Contains 31 references.) (CR)

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Bill Bolin
Texas A&M University-Commerce
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A (Corner of the) Field Defined: Contemplating Name Changes in the Ongoing Professionalization of Basic Writing

At a symposium in 1994, Mel Elfin, Special Projects Editor for *US News and World Report* and the one in charge of the annual special edition on the ranking of colleges, said that he has noticed a disturbing trend taking place the last few decades. Elfin claimed that the relationship between "town" and "gown" had changed recently, that those outside of academe no longer had the same "awe"--and I use his word here--for the professoriate that he perceived they used to. He went on to address this lack of former respect in terms of the university's being too accessible, with accommodations made for a wide diversity of students as never before seen. And he described these accommodations as negative factors on the mission of higher education in the United States. Elfin's remarks come to mind as I ponder the directions under consideration by scholars and practitioners of Basic Writing. In this presentation I want to explore the connections between naming a segment of scholarly inquiry Basic Writing and the professionalization of that segment, focusing especially on the recent call to rename the *Journal of Basic Writing*. Also, I want to describe a number of passages in the written record of the term Basic Writing that illustrate the contention of definitions surrounding that term in the past two decades or more. Finally, I'd like to ponder aloud on the possible ramifications of a new name for the *Journal of Basic Writing*, as called for recently by its editors, toward professionalization of and wider respect for a discipline of Basic Writing.

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In his *Topics*, Cicero says, "When you have taken all the qualities which the thing you wish to define has in common with other things, you should pursue the analysis until you produce its own distinctive quality which can be transferred to no other thing" (qtd. in Crowley 71). In such a manner has basic writing been defined differently from composition studies which, in turn, has been distinguished from English studies. This defining process has moved alongside, or perhaps as a reaction to, the process of disciplinarity. In other words, when scholars distinguish a segment of their field (basic writing from composition studies) through their own inquiry, then through scholarly journals, then through graduate courses in that segment of the field, they are shaping the definition. The current editors of *JBW*, Karen Greenberg and Trudy Smoke, seek to open up discussion, although perhaps not directly, about the "naming" of a particular segment of composition studies tailored for students who, in the words of Mike Rose, "come to us with significant difficulties" (qtd. in Greenberg, Smoke 3) as a step toward reconceiving that segment of the discipline in what could likely be a gesture toward the disciplinarity of basic writing (or whatever it may be called). But first, here is a survey of previous uses of the term *basic writing* (see Bolin):

Although there are a number of other terms used to describe underprepared undergraduate writers and the courses that define them, the conception of the *Journal of Basic Writing* in 1975 appears to have established *basic writing* as the general description of pedagogy geared toward students who do not generally utilize conventional academic discourse (Gray 3; see also Kasden 4). Mina Shaughnessy (1994) points out in the 1970s that "Basic writing, alias remedial, developmental, pre-baccalaureate, or even handicapped English, is commonly thought of as a writing course for young men and women who have many things wrong with them" (321). In a footnote a

dozen years later, Mike Rose qualifies his remarks thus: "I will use the adjective 'remedial' and occasionally the adjective 'basic' ...with some reservation, for they are often more pejorative than accurately descriptive" (353). And by 1987, Theresa Enos writes, "*Basic writing* is a troublesome and diverse term, having become so inclusive that it seems to defy formal definition" (v).

Noting in 1976 that the "teaching of writing to severely underprepared " students is "the frontier of a profession," Shaughnessy (1987) elaborates on the pejorative nature of the terms associated with these students. *Remedial*, *English for the disadvantaged*, *compensatory*, *developmental*, and *basic* all suggest, to varying degrees, that the shortcoming is within the student more so than within the student's educational experience (177; see also *Errors and Expectations* 4). Moreover, she points to the relativeness of such labels: "One school's remedial student may be another's regular or even advanced freshman" (177--78). The tenor of Shaughnessy's essay here is sympathetic to the students who, through open admissions, have been given an opportunity to experience higher education. In fact, at times she calls them "new students," certainly a more respectful label than the conventional ones used widely that suggest intrinsic fault. But she stresses the differences in learning techniques and timetables, not in ability, per se: "Aptitude, [John] Carroll would say, is simply the amount of time required by the learner to attain mastery of a learning task, not a limit on the types of tasks a person can successfully undertake" (189). Shaughnessy (1975) also locates the necessity of basic writing instruction in the interactive web of the students, the teachers, and the academy (2). In a bibliographic essay that provides a wealth of sources concerning basic writing, Andrea Lunsford (1987) echoes Shaughnessy's convictions that medical terminology be abandoned in favor of "moving [basic writing] from the fringes of concern into the full academic community where it becomes...an

opener of long-closed doors to academic discourse, to intellectual rigor, to the way writing helps create ourselves and our worlds" (226). However, the nature of defining differences in writing ability presupposes the language of "deficit theory" (Hull, et al. 324) because one is forced to show how a particular concept is different from, and inferior to, the prototype. In fact, the primary metaphors for basic writing betray a reliance on deficit. The inside/outside metaphor has been most prevalent in the discipline (Wall, Coles 244; Foster 161-62), allowing for a mainstream/margins metaphor with David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* (Wall, Coles 232) and the boundary/passport metaphor (DiPardo 5, 169). More recently, Bruce Horner explores the frontier metaphor first described by Shaughnessy by pointing out such a metaphor's pragmatic uses for developing a scholarly area of inquiry ripe for experimentation as well as the pitfalls inherent in avoiding the histories of a discipline (210-11). Such an avoidance of history keeps basic writing on the margins of larger scholarly disciplines because it is perceived inaccurately as a short-term fix to a "new" problem (212).

Basic writing students are generally constructed as those who find academic writing tasks especially challenging, and *basic writing* is often defined by certain artifactual evidence. Shaughnessy (1987) describes basic writing students as those who "produce...small numbers of words with large numbers of errors" and who seem to "be restricted as writers, but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options" (179). Jon Jonz, in 1987, details a local technique which identifies those students whose ACT or SAT English scores fall below certain thresholds as candidates for basic writing (24). Similarly, in a 1993 article, basic writing is "clearly" identified as "relatively brief and unelaborated, with little subordination...many intrusions from oral language that are less appropriate to

written language...punctuation, capitalization, spelling [which] are erratic" (Kutz, et al. 39), and it reflects consistent prewriting strategies (Perl 22), thus wilting in the face of a product-oriented pedagogy (Perl 15). Also, basic writers are those who "lack the skills needed to write at all" and who would benefit from the lessons on writing from classical rhetoric (Tiner 374). Gail Stygall (1988) notes yet another facet of the basic writer, marked tenacity in the face of unusual adversity: "Like two boxers who are bleeding and winded but not yet ready to quit, basic writers reel into the freshman classroom each year" (28).

Definitions of *basic writing* and *basic writers*, however, are also based on characteristics not readily observed (see, for example, Kutz, et al. 40). In an early issue of *JBW*, Lunsford (1978) adds a dimension by noticing in basic writing students "a consistent egocentricity" which prevents their adopting a distanced voice as generally desired in academic writing (3). And in contrast to the scholarship that defines *basic writing* primarily on the basis of semantics or syntax but related loosely to Lunsford's view, E.D. Hirsch sees a culturally situated cause: "...that whole system of unspoken, tacit knowledge that is shared between speaker and writer" (29). A somewhat different perception of cultural causes is based on economic and social factors, those which might inhibit success in academic settings because such success is neither prevalent nor outwardly esteemed so that those from working-class backgrounds or crime-ridden neighborhoods must make a deliberate, calculated choice to succeed in academia (Rondinone 884-85). Further, Min-zhan Lu points to the investment of culture in language, taking exception with what she terms Shaughnessy's essentialist view of linguistic codes as if those codes can exist separately from "the dynamic power struggle within and among diverse discourses" (329).

George Jensen spotlights the contestation between definitions of *basic writing* as symptom and as social interaction when he observes that many

researchers tend to ignore Shaughnessy's thesis that basic writers are diverse and complicated. He worries that the individual characteristics, such as insecurity, preoccupation with "errors," holistic thinking, and gregariousness, that these researchers identified will combine to form an inaccurate generalization of the basic writer (53--54), a negative picture trained on the faults of basic writers because, for the most part, the researchers "have dealt with isolated personality traits rather than a humanistic personality construct" (56).

The term *basic*, however, has not always pointed to deficiency. In a 1937 handbook titled *Basic Writing: A Textbook for College Freshman* and described as "the kind of book which can be used by all freshman regardless of their ultimate intentions" (Moffett and Johnson vii), *basic writing* represents the essential knowledge about composing required at the college level. The editors write in the Introduction, "For those who are seeking merely a competence in English composition, the sections on the word, sentence, paragraph, exposition, and letter writing constitute a complete course" (Moffett and Johnson viii).

Since the mid-seventies, however, *basic writing* has been consistently, if not exclusively, connected with remediation, marking it as a stop-gap measure for a temporary problem (Stygall, 1994, 339) and encouraging administrators to define the field a particular way by staffing it with temporary adjunct faculty and teaching assistants according to different works by Gail Stygall and Anne DiPardo (Stygall, 1994, 339; DiPardo 170). Such a deficit-oriented use of the term also leads to one of the greatest ironies of any contemporary definition: unlike students who enroll in technical writing or creative writing classes to work toward identification as technical or creative writers, students enrolled in basic

writing classes begin with identification as basic writers and work to distance themselves from it.

If basic writing is to be considered a viable field of study by those not engaged in composition studies, a number of steps must be taken. Certainly, a higher number of full-time, tenured faculty teaching basic writing courses and doing research in basic writing would provide some prestige because of the monetary investment in salary required by the university. Such staffing of more highly ranked faculty has little or nothing to do with competence or enthusiasm but has everything to do with the university's commitment of more expensive resources to basic writing. Another step, of course, is for the flagship journal in basic writing to make initial moves. Lynn Z. Bloom gives a number of fine reasons, beginning with her assertion that Shaughnessy's decision to call underprepared writers basic writers was carefully calculated (9). Indeed, if the common perception of basic writing is of a quick fix to get students up to speed but the real work in basic writing is actually more involved with varieties of language use, then the leading journal must contemplate finding a name that reflects such work, especially since basic writing has picked up negative connotations. In fact, Bloom points out that about one third of articles published in *JBW* the past ten years addressed issue that might be considered outside the parameters of basic writing, and she continues with the thought that "It would be regrettable if a title originally meant to be liberatory had a ghettoizing effect on its subject (11). Bloom's subsequent reasons for changing the name deal with the importance of a journal title's presenting a positive image of its subject, a charge made obvious by the deficit theory which now haunts the term. In a recent and similar move, the name of Freshman English News changed, after 20 years, to Composition Studies/Freshman English News because the editor wanted the journal's name to reflect the changing course names of what had

been previously termed "freshman English. Also, the published articles delved into a number of issues related to composition as a subject of inquiry and not exclusively into the practice of first-year writing curricula (Murphy 3).

Other than outlining criteria for considering a journal title, Bloom shies away from offering any specific suggestions for changing the name of *JBW*, because she is a self-described "occasional contributor," thereby placing her on the fringe of an already marginalized area of study. However, in the following article of that issue, Alan Purves does not likewise shy away. His offering of the title *Journal for Imagining Composition* arises out of a study of the various ways in which basic writing has been and can be perceived. Purves argues that technology is changing the nature of composition studies to the extent that reverberations can be picked up in basic writing (18-19). Since writing has changed, one can logically argue that the term basic--and all its deficit oriented synonyms has changed, as well. Purves opens up the possibility of looking at composition studies, and the abilities to engage in composition activities, as something other than linear. Much as technology, specifically hypertext, has intruded upon the previous notions of reading as predominately linear, it has also paved the way to think of basic writing in terms other than the one threshold to some other kind of writing. Writing ability can be perceived as something other than a one-lane continuum, with some students passing the threshold through placement tests and others sent back to the starting place because of the same tests.

"Composition" might be considered a variety of activities and abilities: organizing, editing, manipulating computer parts, accessing other texts, editing, and so on. And any one of us could be considered at the "basic" level for any one or more of these activities at a particular time. This spatial and more dynamic view of composition and of the situating of "basic" within it comes

comfortably close to Lunsford's earlier call to move basic writing from the fringes into the full academic community. Indeed, even while composition studies struggles to define itself as a bona fide scholarly discipline, with its own journals, tenured faculty, graduate programs, and scholarly books, its satellite disciplines of technical writing, computers and writing, writing center theory, and even basic writing would benefit. But first we've got to do something about that name. The professionalization of basic writing will follow a name change that will garner more respect from both within and without the academy for what scholars in basic writing do.

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